

Twenty-second Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Sir 3:17-28

Heb 12:18-24

Ps 68

Lk 14:1, 7-14

Observing and being observed

In today's gospel passage, something curious happens that we are likely to overlook, and that's because we typically pay more attention to dialogue – to what Jesus and others say – than to the narrative parts that describe the scene in which the dialogues take place. But the genius of the gospels is that they not only record for us the sayings of Jesus – the words spoken by the Word of God himself – but they also give us the framework in which Jesus spoke the words of truth and life. And this narrative framework itself is part of divine revelation, a part of the gospel that is rich, a terrain ready to be explored for all that it might reveal to us about Jesus and our relationship with him.

Take the opening line of today's gospel: "On a sabbath Jesus went to dine at the home of one of the leading Pharisees, *and the people there were observing him carefully.*" Their eyes were on him. The people were watching him. Carefully. Their attention was fixed on him to see what he would say, what he would do. For they knew that he did unexpected things, and said things in new and unanticipated ways.

Jesus's words and deeds, though, were not always appreciated by those whose attention was so fixed on him. For them, his deeds – his miracles and healings – were dangerous and threatened their

position and power. For them his words were subversive, for when Jesus spoke he upended the “authoritative” interpretations and laid bare the hypocrisies of the ruling elite. And yet, Jesus fascinated them, and they could hardly take their eyes off him, “and the people were observing him carefully.” What will he do? What will he say? What does it mean?

It is good that people, whoever they may be – powerful or puny, rich or poor, educated or not – should observe Jesus carefully, whatever their motivations, whether out of respect or out of spite. And this is even more true of those who would be his disciples, who say they are his followers, who call themselves Christians. We, too, should observe Jesus carefully.

This we can do by reading the gospels reverently, devoutly, and attentively, paying attention to the things that Jesus does or refuses to do, to what Jesus says or does not say. And then, being disciples, followers, Christians, we can imitate him. This is what it meant among Jews in first century Palestine to be a disciple to a master. The disciples would observe their master closely so as to become like him, in their manner of speaking, in how they moved, in how they thought, in their likes and dislikes. The master’s preferences became their preferences. By acting like him, by imitating him, they could grow to become so like their master as to become one with him, to become him. Then others would see in them the master. When that happened, if it happened, the transformation was complete, discipleship was a success.

To have the mind of the master, the heart of the master. To have the mind of Christ, the heart of Christ. It is for this reason that any Christian would observe Jesus carefully, so that we can become like him. In this way, the master increases, while the disciple decreases. And people then will see no longer us, but Christ in us. Or as St Paul would put it in his letter to the Galatians: “yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (2:20).

But because having the mind and heart of Christ means forsaking our silly and sinful ways of thinking and being converted to Christ, we often choose to see in Jesus only what we want to see and to hear from Jesus only what pleases us or does not disturb us. In other words, quoting Jesus himself on our reluctance to *metanoia*, conversion:

Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in [us], which says:

‘You shall indeed hear but not understand,
you shall indeed look but never see.

[Crude] is the heart of this people,
they will hardly hear with their ears,
they have closed their eyes,
lest they see with their eyes
and hear with their ears

and understand with their heart and be converted,
and I heal them.’ [Is 6:9-10; Mt 13:14-15]

It is a common and sad experience that many of those who are eager to call themselves Christians seem never to have observed Jesus carefully. Their mindsets, their words, their actions tell a very

different story, and we see in them little that reminds us of Jesus, these eager and avid and public and self-proclaimed Christians.

Not that I see much in myself either that reminds me of Jesus, poor sinner that I am. It is better that I conduct my affairs with humility and keep at trying to become like the one whom I call my master and teacher and leave it others to call me a Christian, if they happen to see something of Jesus in the way I think or speak or act. It is to my shame that others might look to me, whom they know to be Christian, to see something of Jesus and fail to see much of Jesus at all, so poorly do I imitate him. It is to my shame that I am such a poor disciple to such a worthy and great master.

* * * * *

Now, as the people are observing Jesus in this gospel passage, the curious thing that happens is that he is observing them at the same time. The second verse of the passage reads: “He told a parable to those who had been invited, *noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table.*” While they are watching Jesus – whether to imitate him or to discredit him or to be entertained by him – he is watching them, *noticing* their pettiness, their striving, their efforts to get the best for themselves.

Do we think he does not notice? Do we believe that we can hide from him, that he cannot see the intentions of our hearts? Are we so deceived or are we just that oblivious? For confirmation, we have only to look to Psalm 94, where the psalmist thunders:

Understand, you senseless people!
You fools, when will you be wise?
Does the one who shaped the ear not hear,
the one who formed the eye not see?
Does the one who guides nations not rebuke,
the one who teaches man not have knowledge?
The Lord knows the plans of man;
they are like a fleeting breath. [8-11]

As disciples observe their master, the good and true master will also observe his disciples. And since he wants them to succeed, from time to time he will evaluate them, and encourage them, and even correct them. If they are open to his corrections, they will grow in wisdom and make progress. But if they recoil in pride at his corrections and refuse them, they will come to naught, and bearing no fruit, will be pruned away and wither, to be thrown into the fire (Jn 15:1ff).

Jesus marked the undignified behavior of the guests and cautioned them, speaking without anger or hostility, but with a directness that the guests may not have appreciated or been accustomed to. Jesus took note, too, of the host, and spoke to him with perhaps unexpected candor. How they reacted or responded, the gospel does not tell us. But we might imagine that none in attendance were disappointed. After all, Jesus had performed as expected, with unexpected words and unexpected observations that cut against the lack of humility and awareness displayed both the guests and the host. If they were wise, they would heed his words

and take them to heart and amend their ways – with gratitude – that the Master cared enough to notice them, to see them, and to teach them the way of godliness, to call them to conversion.

The mind of the wise appreciates correction, while the foolish hate all reproof (Prov 12:1).

A wise son loves correction, but a senseless one heeds no rebuke (Prov 13:1).

So let us prove ourselves wise and conduct ourselves with humility when the Lord, observing us, corrects us. For though his rebuke may wound our pride, yet the Lord will bind us up. Though his correction may shatter our fragile egos, yet his hands will heal (Job 5:18). So to find favor with God, and become true disciples, let us humble ourselves the more the greater we are, the greater we aspire to be. The Master himself has done no less, and he whose eyes are always upon us has shown the way.